

'My Pencils Outlast Their Erasers': Great Writers on the Art of Revision

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Even the greats don't nail it on the first try.



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It's a new year, and hopeful souls around the world are working diligently on their plans to revise—their health, their attitudes, their lives. But who knows more about the art of revision than great writers? Below, 20 famous writers share their thoughts on revision. The consensus? It's pretty important.



"If it sounds like writing, I rewrite it." —**Elmore Leonard**, *Newsweek*, 1985

"Whenever you feel an impulse to perpetrate a piece of exceptionally fine writing, obey it—wholeheartedly—and delete it before sending your manuscript to press. Murder your darlings." —**Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch**, *On the Art of Writing*, 1916

"I have rewritten—often several times—every word I have ever published. My pencils outlast their erasers." —**Vladimir Nabokov**, *Speak, Memory*, 1966

"Mostly when I think of pacing, I go back to Elmore Leonard, who explained it so perfectly by saying he just left out the boring parts. This suggests cutting to speed the pace, and that's what most of us end up having to do (kill your darlings, kill your darlings, even when it breaks your egocentric little scribbler's heart, kill your darlings) ... I got a scribbled comment that changed the way I rewrote my fiction once and forever. Jotted below the machine-generated signature of the editor was this mot: 'Not bad, but PUFFY. You need to revise for length. Formula: 2nd Draft = 1st Draft - 10%. Good luck.' —**Stephen King**, *On Writing*, 2000

"Substitute 'damn' every time you're inclined to write 'very;' your editor will delete it and the writing will be just as it should be." —**Mark Twain**

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Interviewer: How much rewriting do you do?

Hemingway: It depends. I rewrote the ending of *Farewell to Arms*, the last page of it, 39 times before I was satisfied.

Interviewer: Was there some technical problem there? What was it that had stumped you?

Hemingway: Getting the words right. —**Ernest Hemingway**, *The Paris Review* Interview, 1956

"I don't write easily or rapidly. My first draft usually has only a few elements worth keeping. I have to find what those are and build from them and throw out what doesn't work, or what simply is not alive." —**Susan Sontag**

"I'm all for the scissors. I believe more in the scissors than I do in the pencil." —**Truman Capote**, *Conversations With Capote*, by Lawrence Grobel, 1985

"Read over your compositions and, when you meet a passage which you think is particularly fine, strike it out."

—**Samuel Johnson**

"Your eloquence should be the servant of the ideas in your head. Your rule might be this: If a sentence, no matter how excellent, does not illuminate your subject in some new and useful way, scratch it out." —**Kurt Vonnegut**, *How to Use the Power of the Printed Word*

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"It takes me six months to do a story. I think it out and write it sentence by sentence—no first draft. I can't write five words but that I can change seven." —**Dorothy Parker**, *The Paris Review Interview*, 1956

"Put down everything that comes into your head and then you're a writer. But an author is one who can judge his own stuff's worth, without pity, and destroy most of it." —**Colette**, *Casual Chance*, 1964

"Writing and rewriting are a constant search for what it is one is saying." —**John Updike**

"Throw up into your typewriter every morning. Clean up every noon." —**Raymond Chandler**

"Anyone and everyone taking a writing class knows that the secret of good writing is to cut it back, pare it down, winnow, chop, hack, prune, and trim, remove every superfluous word, compress, compress, compress ...

Actually, when you think about it, not many novels in the Spare tradition are terribly cheerful. Jokes you can usually pluck out whole, by the roots, so if you're doing some heavy-duty prose-weeding, they're the first to go. And there's some stuff about the whole winnowing process I just don't get. Why does it always stop when the work in question has been reduced to sixty or seventy thousand words—entirely coincidentally, I'm sure, the minimum length for a publishable novel? I'm sure you could get it down to twenty or thirty if you tried hard enough. In fact, why stop at twenty or thirty? Why write at all? Why not just jot the plot and a couple of themes down on the back of an envelope and leave it at that? The truth is, there's nothing very utilitarian about fiction or its creation, and I suspect that people are desperate to make it sound manly, back-breaking labor because it's such a wussy thing to do in the first place. The obsession with austerity is an attempt to compensate, to make writing resemble a real job, like farming, or logging. (It's also why people who work in advertising put in twenty-hour days.) Go on, young writers—treat yourself to a joke, or an adverb! Spoil yourself! Readers won't mind!" —**Nick Hornby**, *The Polysyllabic Spree*

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"By the time I am nearing the end of a story, the first part will have been reread and altered and corrected at least one hundred and fifty times. I am suspicious of both facility and speed. Good writing is essentially rewriting. I am positive of this." —**Roald Dahl**

"The best advice I can give on this is, once it's done, to put it away until you can read it with new eyes. Finish the short story, print it out, then put it in a drawer and write other things. When you're ready, pick it up and read it, as if you've never read it before. If there are things you aren't satisfied with as a reader, go in and fix them as a writer: that's revision." —**Neil Gaiman**

"Reread, rewrite, reread, rewrite. If it still doesn't work, throw it away. It's a nice feeling, and you don't want to be cluttered with the corpses of poems and stories which have everything in them except the life they need." —**Helen Dunmore**

"Don't look back until you've written an entire draft, just begin each day from the last sentence you wrote the preceding day. This prevents those cringing feelings, and means that you have a substantial body of work before you get down to the real work which is all in the edit." —**Will Self**

"You never have to change anything you got up in the middle of the night to write." —**Saul Bellow**

